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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002241

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EAP/PMBS, EAP/PD, DRL/CRA, INR/EAP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [KPAO](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: MORE JOURNALISTS SLAIN

REF: A. MANILA 1595

[1](#)B. MANILA 1151

[1](#)C. MANILA 0312

[1](#)D. 04 MANILA 5853

[1](#)1. (U) This message is Sensitive but Unclassified --  
Please handle accordingly.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary: Two more journalists have been slain in the Philippines in the past two weeks. This brings to five the number of killings of journalists this year, according to most sources. Police appear to be actively investigating the latest killings, but no suspects have been arrested as of yet. Malacanang condemned the killings, and is creating a special fund meant to facilitate investigations and to protect witnesses. In apparent reaction to the criticism it has received domestically and in two recent international reports, the GRP seems to be newly aware of the gravity of the situation. Mission continues to emphasize to the GRP the need for swift action against those who have perpetrated the attacks. End Summary.

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Latest Killings  
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[1](#)3. (U) Killings of journalists in the Philippines are continuing at an alarming rate, with the recent murders of two more media personnel. On May 10, two unidentified assailants killed Philip Agustin, who was a publisher/columnist/reporter for the "Starline Times Recorder," a local newspaper, in Dingalan, Aurora Province in southern Luzon. Dingalan City Councilor Valentino Lapuz and Agustin's family accused Dingalan Mayor Jaime Ylarde of "masterminding" the killing. On May 11, Agustin was scheduled to release 500 reprinted copies of the May 2-8 issue of the newspaper, which carried stories alleging financial irregularities involving Ylarde. Agustin specifically accused the mayor of not moving forward with resettlement programs for more than 1,000 families displaced by landslides caused by a series of typhoons in November-December 2004 (Ref D). He also accused Ylarde of corruptly diverting funds from the city's operating budget and calamity funds, and making profit by selling relief goods and timber. Ylarde denied that he was involved in any way in the killing.

[1](#)4. (U) On May 4, three unidentified men shot and killed Klein Cantoneros, a radio broadcaster and journalist for DXAA Radio in Dipolog City, Zamboanga del Norte Province in Mindanao. Cantoneros, who frequently criticized local officials for alleged corruption and mismanagement of government agencies, had received death threats prior to his murder.

[1](#)5. (U) With the latest two slayings, the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) reports that five journalists have been killed in work-related slayings this year in the Philippines. (Note: The GRP's police "Task Force Newsmen" puts the figure at three, asserting that two of the murders were not work-related, but the NUJP figure is the most widely accepted.) Four additional journalists have survived attempts on their lives since January 1, 2005.

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Police Response  
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[1](#)6. (U) The Philippine National Police (PNP) reacted to the slayings quickly. A regional police team in Zamboanga del Norte Province was tasked with investigating the Cantoneros case and it released an artist's sketch of one of the suspects. PNP Director General Arturo Lomibao removed the chief of the Zamboanga del Norte regional police and the Dipolog city chief of police from the investigating team at the request of the broadcaster's family, which claimed that the two officials could not be trusted to investigate the crimes impartially. In the case of Augustin, Lomibao assured the victim's family that there would be "swift police action to arrest and prosecute the killers." Police have not yet identified any suspects in the case.

17. (U) The PNP's "Task Force Newsmen," which was formed by the GRP last year in response to the wave of killings, updated Mission on the progress of their investigations. Regarding the case of Marlyne Esperat, the PNP confirmed that it has arrested three suspects in connection with the killing, and said a fourth suspect had surrendered voluntarily. The Department of Justice has filed murder charges against the four in the regional trial court in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat Province, in Mindanao. (Note: Esperat, a well-known journalist in Mindanao, was killed on March 24.) Task Force Newsmen could not confirm that any other suspects had been apprehended for the other killings.

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GRP Reacts  
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18. (SBU) Reacting to the latest killings, which received a high level of press play, the GRP announced that the continuing violence against members of the media was a top "security" concern for the Philippines. President Arroyo directed Interior and Local Government Secretary Angelo Reyes to draw up a plan to solve and prevent the attacks. GRP officials are also meeting with press groups on May 16 to discuss ways of solving and preventing the slayings. At this meeting, the GRP will formally announce the creation of a "Press Freedom Fund," which will allocate 5 million pesos (92,600 USD) to create a "quick reaction" team that will investigate cases, offer rewards for information leading to the arrest and prosecution of perpetrators, and upgrade the PNP's witness protection program. The money for the fund is being donated from the coffers of Malacanang and the House Speaker.

19. (U) Several senators have also raised concerns about the killings. Manuel Villar, chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Order, proposed a resolution that would instruct the Committee to conduct an inquiry and to recommend policy measures meant to protect press freedom. Bong Revilla, Jr., Chairman of the Senate Committee on Public Information and Mass Media, also expressed alarm over the recent violence against the press. He challenged police leaders to take full responsibility for the investigation and to "hunt down" the perpetrators. Senator Revilla also appealed to the public to help the authorities solve the cases by volunteering information that would expedite their resolution.

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Comment  
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110. (SBU) In apparent reaction to the criticism it has received on the issue domestically and in two recent international reports, the Philippine government appears newly aware of the gravity of the situation. (Note: "Reporters Without Borders" issued a report on the situation in early May, as did the "Committee to Protect Journalists," which characterized the Philippines as "the most dangerous place in the world" for media personnel.) The NUJP says it continues to worry about the situation and hopes that the latest killings will spur GRP efforts to get to the bottom of the string of attacks, which have gone on for years now. (Note: Since 1986, over 60 media personnel have been slain in the Philippines, and there has only been one conviction.) At this point, it is important that the GRP ratchet up the pressure on the police to follow up on any and all leads, and bring charges where that is justified. Mission continues to emphasize to the GRP the need for the swift apprehension of those who have perpetrated the attacks.  
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